

Book Review

Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* is about the "inner being" and heart of teaching. It is a book that "builds on a simple premise: *good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*" (p. 10). The meaning of this is that the prodigy of the teacher's task comes from within. This is the author's essential argument throughout this book that the "inner being" of the teacher is in tandem with good teaching.

At the onset, the author admits that he is "a teacher at heart," and there are occasions in the classroom when he can "hardly hold the joy." However, he refuses to allow his heart to harden because of his "love for learners, learning, and the teaching life" (p. 1). Due to the nature of the profession, teachers should expect to have good and bad days. For this reason, teachers should accept their limitations and confront these experiences, not avoid them, so they can better understand their students and themselves. This can yield important insights into teaching and learning.

In addition, teachers need to explore their inner life so they can gain a deeper awareness of their integrity and identity. Moreover, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. This is, according to Palmer, because, "*Identity* lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make a person's life and *integrity* lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring the person wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death" (p.13).

Since teaching emerges from within, knowledge of self is a necessity for anyone to become a good teacher. "Whatever self-knowledge we attain as teachers will serve our

students and scholarship well" (p.3). Therefore, he challenges teachers to explore the deepest part of their being--their identity and integrity. Both--integrity and identity--have to do with a teacher's "good deeds", "shadows and limits," "wounds and fears," as well as their "strength and weakness." The message from Palmer is clear; teachers need to find meaning within. As noted by him,

I am painfully aware of the times in my own teaching when I lose touch with my inner teacher and therefore with my own authority. In those times I try to gain power by barricading myself behind the podium of my status while wielding the threat of grades. But when the teacher within me authorizes my teaching, I need neither weapons nor armor to teach (p. 33).

He also points out that the very nature of a teacher's calling always places him/her at the intersection between public and private, objective and subjective, social and individual, outer and inner. This causes the disruption in the "fabric of connectedness" that teaching and learning requires. Therefore, if teachers want to mature and expand their capacity for connectedness at the heart of good teaching, they must comprehend and resist the perverse, but puissant draw of the "disconnected life." Teachers should not allow their internal fear to shut down those "experiments with truth" that allow them to connect with students--and thus shut down the capacity to teach as well. Hence, in order to retain their identity as individuals, and to protect their integrity of their teaching lives, teachers must possess the ability to transcend fear and reconnect with reality for the benefit of teaching and learning.

To be successful here, teachers must learn to deal with paradoxes, especially the paradoxes arising from within themselves. It is the lens through which teachers can learn more about their identity and integrity from which good teaching comes. As noted by Palmer,

Paradoxical thinking requires that we embrace a view of the world in which opposites are joined, so that we can see the world clearly and see it whole.... When we think things together, we reclaim the life in the world, in our students, in ourselves (p. 66).

Although paradox offers no cookbook fix for teaching, it fits who teachers are; it offers guidance on any level of education and with any field of study.

In final chapters, Palmer writes about a Quaker structure he adopted for use with faculty called the "clearness committee." Borrowing from the Quaker tradition, the focus is on the inner life of the teacher and the need for a collegial community in which to develop. It is the author's belief that:

There are no formulas for good teaching, and the advice of experts has but marginal utility. If we want to grow in practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft (p. 141).

Therefore, in order for teachers not to get lost, practicing "self-delusion" and running in "self-serving" circles, they need the guidance that a community of collegial discourse provides--a community of support that will sustain them in their trials of teaching and the collective wisdom about the art of teaching.

In Palmer's opinion, privatization of teaching makes it difficult for institutions to become more effective at achieving their mission. Teachers will continue to pay a high price for the "privatization" of what they do in the classroom because the "growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it" (p. 144). No approach to educational reform will be successful unless teachers have on-going opportunities for personal renewal and dialogue with each other. He envisions teaching as "creating a place in which the community of truth is practiced" where teachers no longer teach alone and out of collegial view (p. 90). This community of

truth, according to Palmer, provides teachers with the opportunity to engage in "good talk about teaching," while at the same time" enhancing both their professional practice and the selfhood from which it comes" (p.144). In the final pages of the book, Palmer offers suggestions and provides three coexisting models of community in which to accomplished this: civic, therapeutic, and business-based.

REFLECTIONS

The book is beautifully written; however, the author seems to lose focus toward the end when he slips into a discussion about the possibility of institutional revitalization of American and administrative management. This was a mistake on the part of Palmer. In spite of that fact, the book is suggestive and filled with insights making it a very informative book. It can change the lives of teachers who have long felt isolated and are no longer experiencing the joy of being in the classroom. However, if the reader is looking for a book that is filled with philosophical justification of inquiry and recommendation, this is not the one. Nonetheless, this book is a good selection.

